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ABSTRACT

Ways in which elementary school students value, adapt, and modify the curriculum are revealed by reporting statements of children in grades 2 through 4 in a midwestern parochial school. Over 250 hours of observation as well as interviews with students, teachers, parents, and the principal formed the basis of research. Data were assembled through writing field notes, audio-taping interviews, and collecting school documents, student papers, textbooks, and lesson plans. Children reported they valued subject matter because they realized the necessity of the subject, liked it, felt successful at it, and felt it was "fun." They did not, however, equate fun with easy or superficially entertaining subjects; rather, observation reveals that they have fun when a task is interesting, difficult, perplexing, and challenging. Boredom occurs when students are given standardized assignments and must wait for the teacher in order to proceed with their work. They do manage to become physically involved with passive lessons by, for example, miming a story being read to them. Students modify the curriculum by adding their accumulated experiences to it. They express a desire for personal activity and the challenges of learning subject matter that will be introduced to them in later grades. Clearly, challenging students is critical to their learning. (KC)

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' INTERACTION WITH THE PLANNED CURRICULUM THROUGH THEIR VALUING, ADAPTING, AND MODIFYING SUBJECT MATTER

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Abstract

Through the categories of how students value, adapt, and modify the planned activities and subject matter of the curriculum an educational criticism of curriculum is given. The evidence was obtained during a naturalistic study of how elementary school children interpret the curriculum.

Children reported that they valued subject matter because they realized the necessity of the subject, liked it, felt successful at it, and it was "fun." Their comments point to the need for personal interaction with the curriculum. Evidence of how children adapt the overt curriculum to meet their needs is linked with the structure of the curriculum. Examples of how children modify the curriculum supports Dewey's conceptualization of experience.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' INTERACTION WITH THE PLANNED CURRICULUM THROUGH THEIR VALUING, ADAPTING, AND MODIFYING SUBJECT MATTER

Through the categories of how students value, adapt, and modify the planned activities and subject matter of the curriculum I am going to discuss how elementary students of a particular school interact with the curriculum. Included are a description of the school and study, a discussion and interpretation of the evidence, comments about the value of the information for theory and practice, and reflections about the value of the method of study.

THE SCHOOL AND THE METHODS OF THE STUDY

The school building sits on the edge of a small creek's ravine. A neatly mowed hillside leads to the creek as it meanders by the school yard. Wooded areas protect the far side of the creek from the surrounding suburban neighborhood helping to form an island for the school. The surroundings create an unusual setting for a school building in this large midwestern city.

Eight classrooms in the small building house eight grade levels from first through eight. All equal in size, the classrooms appear to be roomy in the lower grades, with small children and desks, and crowded in the upper grades, with young teens and larger desks. Windows in each classroom expose the creek and its ravine, the children's playground.

In each room a chalkboard stares at the students; each is a giant, black screen. Another chalkboard stares blankly from the right serving as a room divider separating coat racks from students' desks. A cinder block wall, painted a non-descript shade of tan, encloses the back of each room. Within each room are neatly placed student desks and a teacher's desk to complete the standard furniture.

Students occupy desks with gaping mouths under their flat tops for book storage. Separate chairs of metal and plastic complete the pair. Teachers have desks with many drawers and their large desk tops are cluttered with signs of permanence.

All of the rooms in the school are alike—in construction. All of the rooms are different—in personality. Children and teachers occupying the classrooms create their own environment. During the school day messages on the bulletin boards, announcements on the chalkboards, books on the shelves, and the children give each classroom a unique feeling.

On the first day of school the thin bulletin board, in the sixth grade room, over the chalkboard, proclaims "May Fall's Golden Days Bring Us Peace." The teacher is informing the class about the theme of peace for the coming school year. During her discussion a hand is raised and a student inquires, "Are we going to change classes this year?" At the same instant a note flies overhead, landing neatly in the middle of a recipient's desk. Twelve minutes into the school year and business is underway. Teacher's greeting, students' questions about the organization of the year to be, "Who's our gym teacher? Who's our music teacher?

Is this notebook okay?", note passing to friends—all this happening at once. The teacher continues to explain the operating procedures for the year while children listen; leaf through new textbooks on their desks; and fiddle with new pens, pencils, notebooks, and markers.

Using the methods of participant observation, I recorded over 250 hours of observations and interviews with students, teachers, parents, and the principal of a small parochial school. The school exists in a suburban, middle-class neighborhood of a large midwestern city. One class of 30-35 students in each grade level from first through eighth forms the school. As a private school associated with a church, the people there comprise a self-contained community within the context of a major urban center.

Several questions concerning the environment of the school and community, the interaction of the children, curriculum and environment, and the relationships children establish between and among these factors guided the search for information. I assembled the evidence by writing field notes; making video-tapes of classroom activities; audio-taping interviews; collecting school documents, students' papers, textbooks, and lesson plans; and participating in day-to-day life in the school. Participating led to investigating not only the events of the school day, but also the extra-curricular activities sponsored by the school and the family life of the students. I observed; interviewed; and participated within the school building and the homes of twelve student participants.

Although I interviewed and observed everyone I could who was associated with the school, the majority of my observations centered upon twelve student participants chosen from three classes involving the second, fourth, and sixth grade levels. The study revolved around the twelve children, their classmates, teachers, and parents. During the initial stages of the study I made conscious and reasoned choices of student participants. Their actions and the opinions of the teachers and the principal contributed to my decisions. For example, some students became informants because they introduced themselves to me while I chose their classmates because they were distant. I wanted to weigh the opinions and ideas of all types of children. Hence, children from three different grade levels, an equal number of boys and girls, a mixture of friendly and reticent children, and students who performed at various levels of scholarship participated in the study.

Information I learned from these people and facts I obtained form an interwoven network of corroborating evidence. This evidence, based upon the activities, environment, and people of the school fits together to become an interpretation of how students value, adapt, and modify the curriculum. As the student of this environment, the interpretation here is mine. It rests upon what happened in the community of the school and the knowledge I brought to each situation.

VALUING

How, then, do these children value subject matter? Ten year old Jimmy offers his views about subjects, "I don't like reading

so I don't do much. I've always wanted to be smart in reading because in social studies you've got to read." Upon the return of a perfect math paper, he offers, "Math is my best subject. Reading and spelling, the two most important ones are my worst. The two most important ones . . ." he mutters. When I ask if reading is interesting for him, he responds, "No, not really."

Mary Anne, a sixth grade student adds insight to Jimmy's comments about reading, "It's the most important subject in school. If you couldn't read you couldn't take notes and learn social studies . . . Reading is like an activity, because you're not learning about something . . ."

In response to the question, in school, where do you learn the most? Elaine grins shyly and tentatively advances, "Indoor recess?" Then, "Scholastic books—they teach you a lot. I have a book under my social studies book so when we're doing social studies I read it. I turn the pages when we all turn the pages."

Kurt, an eight year old, practical child, overhears his parents discussing his dislike of the Dr. Suess books his teacher recommends for reading practice at home and queries, "Why would you want to walk on a ceiling?"

Through their comments we can see the children understanding the necessity of a subject like reading because it is a tool for further study in school. Their reasoning parallels Dewey's thoughts about the place of reading in the curriculum (1979). They speak of reading as a key to being able to explore other subjects. They also perceive its relationship to success in school.

Competency in reading leads to the ability to deal with other subjects presented in written form. Perhaps this is why students surveyed by Goodlad listed reading as one of the most important subjects in school (1982).

The children also value their school subjects by liking the topic. Many of them report they like a class subject or topic because "I am good at it." Success has a role to play in how children value a curriculum topic, but easily won victories are not savored. A task must have some challenge to it (Bloom, 1981).

Related to liking something by being successful at it, these children also categorize and value topics because "They are fun." They do not, however, equate "fun" with easy or superficially entertaining. Watching several children complete complex tasks and hearing them report that they are having fun creates a concept of fun as interesting, difficult, perplexing, and challenging. Often they speak of school work as boring or dumb. Elaine criticizes, "I like spelling, but I don't like the work in the book. You don't learn anything. The spelling books, they say word parts and it gets you all mixed up. And it's not teaching you anything. I learned syllables." Frequently the students' requests for a challenge are not fulfilled. George discusses how he would like to learn more, "She (the teacher) just tells us we have to sit back. I wish she would take some of us aside and have a substitute work with us. I'd like to learn decimals."

The opinion about a lack of challenging work is not peculiar to these children. In a letter to the editor of a local newspaper

a seventh grade student from the public schools writes, "I think we need more interesting subjects taught in schools. Although some students think school is difficult and challenging, others are bored. Many of these students are bored because school's easy and not very interesting. If they could tie in some subjects which interest students, along with the basics, it could give them an interest in doing their work." (Rogosin, 1982, p. 4) The children are asking for a more interesting and challenging presentation of curriculum from teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum specialists.

In these discussions the children are also asking for an acting out a request for a personally relevant curriculum (Eisner and Vallance, 1974; and Eisner, 1979). Why does Elaine find her own books more interesting than her social studies textbook? Is Kurt ready to appreciate the fantasy world in the books of Dr. Suess? If Jimmy is not interested in reading, what kinds of books will get him to be interested? Realizing the need to learn, being successful at that task, liking what they are doing, and having fun while learning all point to a need by children to establish a personal interaction with the planned curriculum.

ADAPTING

How the children in this study adapt the planned curriculum to meet their needs supports their quest for personal relevance. It also raises the issue of their need to adapt the routine

activities of school of their needs. Lisa captures this routine in a non-assigned poetry initiative.

Class

hand raising
pencil moving
angry teachers
eating peaches
note passing
hair brushing
rrring—lunch time!
kids pushing
kids jumping
teachers taking aspirin
rrring time to come in
and it starts all over again

Several of Lisa's poems include the refrain "and it starts all over again." She captures the cyclical nature of school. As the days build up to months and years, the repetition does not escape the children. The length of the school day and time schedules force some of these cycles, but would they be as noticeable to the children if their school day is more challenging?

When directly asked whether they liked school, second grade students answer yes, fourth grade students give mixed reviews, and sixth grade students respond with, "I'm not really sure how I feel . . . I wish I didn't have to go."; "It is not the best thing in the world, you know."; "It's okay."; "It's boring. The little

kids have more fun. When I pass their room they are always making things and coloring." These are the opinions of the student participants. None of them has significant problems with assignments, grades, peer relationships, or adult relationship. In class they contribute to discussions, ask questions, and do their assignments. They also spend a great deal of time entertaining themselves by doodling, talking to friends, playing with toys, and reading novels in class. Bob sums it up while drawing in his notebook, "I'm bored. I've got to do something." What leads these children to boredom?

The children are given standardized assignments as a class and it is up to each child to complete the work. Lisa analyzes how this system can break down while criticizing her workbooks, "The workbook page might have something like pronouns. If you don't know about pronouns . . . you have to wait for the teacher to explain them to you. What happens is you have to work at the pace of the teacher—which is pretty slow."

Waiting for the teacher creates great gaps of useless time, but even group discussions and lessons try the patience of children while they are to listen passively. Near Thanksgiving the children in the second grade are listening to the teacher read them a story about Squanto. The children are sitting quietly at their empty desks as they do whenever the teacher reads to them. As he listens to the story, Clark begins to create and mime signs representing parts of the story. When Squanto is mentioned, he puts his fingers on his head and draws an imaginary headband.

During the part about the feast he chews a mouthful of imitation food. A child sitting near Clark begins to mime; it spreads to other children. Gradually, everyone silently acts out the story.

This is an example of children becoming physically involved in an acceptable manner with a rather passive lesson. They have adapted the planned lesson to their needs. Adapting to the curriculum does not always go this smoothly. Personal errands (McCutcheon, 1976), the time children steal from the planned activities of the curriculum in order to serve their own needs and wants, can be disruptive. In a discussion of discipline problems, Spencer-Hall (1981) reminds us that these activities show children to be capable of their own plans of action. Unobtrusive or obtrusive personal errands are a signal given by children to teachers. They demonstrate the lack of a fit between the child and the present activity, the weaknesses of planning, and the lack of personal relevance.

The children of this school report boredom and they actively engage in fighting that boredom. They create their own activity or adapt the curriculum when they are in passive situations like lectures, gaps in between assignments, or times work cannot proceed without the teacher's help. These and other situations lead to filling in time with activities of one's own device. In this way children adapt to the curriculum as planned and executed by the teacher.

MODIFYING

During the activities of the school day there is evidence of children trying to relate the content of their lessons to their

personal experiences. A discussion in class often brings forth comments beginning with "When I was on my way home from school I found . . ."; "Last night on television I saw . . ."' "In the newspaper I read . . .". What children do at home and school they relate to their school work on a daily basis. In doing so, they give their teachers signals about their interests and past experiences.

Amy, a precocious second grade student, likes to write and illustrate her own books and stories at home and she carries this activity into her school day by writing exceptional journal entries when assigned and filling in the spare time she has in school by writing her own stories. Toby, a fourth grade student, being tutored in reading, astounds his teacher and class by accurately naming all the states surrounding his own state, but he explains, "I've been in all of them." Clark, an eight year old, draws interesting and extremely accurate maps from memory when writing in his journal. Even though his teacher is surprised, his mother understands because he has been interested in maps since their summer trip to Florida when he entertained himself in the car with the road maps.

Throughout the school, each child makes sense of the planned curriculum by attaching bits and pieces they read and hear to their own accumulated experiences. At the same time, their background of experience gives them a direction for pulling a discussion, an essay, or a problem into their realm of experience and meaning. Those children who speak out reveal this by their

words; those children who are questioned can explain the connections they make. In this way they form their knowledge about, their skills in dealing with, and their attitudes about the school and school work.

Children would modify the curriculum based upon their own desires. They ask for specific changes based on their interests, but the changes have common themes to them. One is active participation by learning how to do and make things. When asked what subjects they would like to add to the school day, fourth grade students respond, "To learn about making books." "Whenever are school has pizza we do a craft like with cardboard paper." "My new school subject is if a teacher could bring a box of bugs or plants into the classroom." "Go outside and find things. Go back into the woods." "Like let there be a art day ones a year. Where all the students do art all day." "A manchin school! 9 year kids driving expansive cars!" They also ask for time to read and solve mathematic problems. From their comments we see not only a request for personal activity, but also the use of active and present tense language adding to the sense of their need for participation.

Another theme in the children's modification of the curriculum involves challenge. Students from the school would like to attack topics they know are for their future; those they perceive as challenging. George would like to learn decimals. A fourth grade student wants to do "Eighth grade" math. Another

student creates "spath - a combination of spelling and math." This desire for challenge as well as their desire for active participation relates to how they value the curriculum. These children, whatever their age, can express changes they would like to make in the curriculum; they are capable of valuing, adapting, and modifying the curriculum.

The evidence from the children in this study as they value, adapt, and modify the curriculum establishes their interaction with the curriculum. This evidence supports their interaction, including reaction and proaction with the processes of the evolving curriculum. It relates to the theoretical position of Dewey (1958, 1971, 1979) as he discusses the role of interaction and experience.

> The concepts of <u>situation</u> and interaction are inseperable from each other. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place, between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment. (1979, p. 43)

As it relates to school, the students' experience of the curriculum is much like Bruner's (1982) process of "negotiating knowledge." There is an interplay between the child and the curriculum as the child uses knowledge. But, that interplay is personal as children make decisions about the value of, how to adapt to, and how to modify the curriculum. These efforts are affecti e in nature. They rest upon the individual's previous experience and are acted upon for personal goals. In distinguishing the difference between "school knowledge" and "action

knowledge" in the curriculum, Barnes (1976, p. 81) states:

> School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer teacher's questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. Insofar as we use knowledge for our purposes however we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say, that it has become 'action knowledge'. (p. 81)

As the children turn school knowledge into action knowledge, they are reflecting upon its value and use. In turn, they are making judgements about the curriculum and school. This process is personal and indicates the need to create opportunities for personal relevance within the planned curriculum.

For practitioners, the teachers in the classroom, the messages students give as they value, adapt to, and modify the curriculum can help them to plan effective activities and, as Dewey writes, achieve "growth" (1979, p. 49). Their interest and excitement about an activity is a sign of the activity's success. Their discussion of prior experiences indicates a need to relate new content to personal and common experiences. Boredom with an activity may not be an expression of dislike of content, but a dislike of the approach or what is being done. Clearly, challenge is critical. Few children enjoy the repetitive, lackluster, and often confusing approach of drills and workbooks. As teachers interact with students during the school day, they need to be sensitive to the affective processes taking place. The evidence

of these processes can be incorporated into evaluation of existing curriculum and used in planning future curriculum.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT METHOD

This study lies between ethnography and educational criticism. As an ethnography it describes what is happening as children interact with the curriculum. As an educational criticism, the children serve as the critics; their comments subjectively direct us to form new ways to view the processes of curriculum (Eisner, 1979). I have observed, recorded, interpreted, and organized the report.

The value of this method to the study is to open to exploration and to learn from the processes of schooling as they happen. In this paper I have explored how children interact with the curriculum through valuing, adapting, and modifying the curriculum. The method has enabled me to record evidence in many ways as it happened; as it is reported by children; and after personal reflection by children has taken place.

We can see specifics and generalities at the same time. We can also see objectified and subjectified evidence at the same time. The evidence supports and extends theory, it also provides information and directions for teachers both within the school of the study and in classrooms everywhere. We, as teachers, may learn to take note of our students critical comments about the curriculum and we, as researchers, may wish to explore children's notions of challenge.

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